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O.C. to Start Teen Foster Boys' Court

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SANTA ANA - Less than a year after opening a special collaborative court for girls in the juvenile dependency system, the Orange County Superior Court is gearing up to launch its counterpart: a boys' court.

The court, unique in the state, will offer court supervision, services and counseling to teenage boys who were victims of neglect or abuse and have ended up in long-term foster care.

"In my research, there's not another court addressing these boys," said Orange County Superior Court Judge Maria D. Hernandez, who will oversee the special calendar come Oct. 1.

These boys need the attention. According to Hernandez, 70 percent of California prison inmates were in foster care at some point as youths.

The judge saw the pattern often as a deputy public defender for 12 years. She said her former clients typically began in the dependency system. Then, when they began committing crimes, they moved into the delinquency system and, after turning 18, become adult criminals.

The new program is modeled closely after the Orange County juvenile girls' court, where Commissioner Jane Shade has been working with 26 girls ages 13 to 16 since last November. None of the girls can be reunited with family or adopted, and all will stay wards of the county until they turn 18.

"These are teenagers who [the system] is not doing a very good job of raising," Juvenile Court Supervising Judge Carolyn Kirkwood said.

The two special courts are meant to be "gender-responsive not just gender-specific," Kirkwood said, and offer different treatments and programs for young females or males.

For example, girls respond well to the relationships they develop with the female social workers and mentors, the judge said, while boys learn by doing.

The goal of the boys' court is to give the youth most at risk some dedicated, specialized attention that helps them finish high school, learn life skills, live in a more stable environment and develop confidence.

“Some of them just need a lift in their self-esteem,” Hernandez said. “They need adults who can tell them, ‘We believe in you and can help you.’”

As part of the court program, the 27 boys identified so far will work with individual volunteer advocates and with three male social workers, as well as with representatives from the county education and health departments, their lawyers and the judge.

Hernandez also is bringing in male law enforcement officers to act as mentors. “There’s been a tremendous outpouring of support,” she said.

Shade said the girls’ court program is showing success. Most of the girls in the program previously had trouble in school, mental health issues and histories of abuse, but nearly all have improved, she said. One girl was admitted to the prestigious Orange County High School of the Arts - although another recently was arrested for carjacking.

California courts in San Mateo, Alameda and Santa Clara counties have specialized juvenile calendars for girls accused of crimes, but not girls in the dependency system, according to a report by the National Center for Youth Law.

Chicago had a boys’ court from 1914 to 1969 aimed at keeping youthful offenders segregated from adult criminals.

But the boys and girls in the Orange County program are not criminals, Kirkwood said. “They’re in our foster care system because of problems the adults have,” she said. “They’ve not done anything wrong.”